The Ohio State University

Commencement Address

30 August 1984

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Mr. President, members of the University community, and friends: First, President Jennings, let me thank you on behalf of my colleagues in Classics and in the College of Humanities for inviting one of our number to address this graduating class. We are appreciative of your perception of the Humanities as a major element in the educational mission of the University.

I had begun to prepare a set of remarks appropriate to this occasion when the LANTERN issued a challenge with the headline "Roman Orator for the Arena." Momentary visions of BEN HUR and SPARTACUS passed quickly; I'll leave this arena to Tara Vanderveer and Eldon Miller. After the euphoria of the moment I set myself guidelines:

(1) give them some Latin, since they'll certainly expect it and they are all relieved enough to tolerate it;

(2) say something uplifting, but remember that you can't remold characters that may have been set as early as age 3-5;

(3) avoid the traditional opening joke - you don't know any new ones and your jokes in class haven't exactly sparkled;

(4) although this is a political year, be as non-partisan as all former citizens of your native Whittier, California;

(5) and last, watch the quotations - even from the Classics- they've had their last final and nearly a week of celebration; be reasonable.

In the choice of a motto for the University our predecessors could scarcely have improved upon the Latin phrase disciplina in civitatem, by which they meant "education for citizenship." A land grant institution has a particular relationship to the citizen body and a responsibility to prepare its students for an active role in society. This in no way implies a limitation to subjects directly transferable to the market place, as the seal of the University makes quite clear; rather it looks to the special meaning of disciplina, for Roman education was always geared to the moral instruction of the pupil and was especially designed to prepare the pupil to meet the demands of citizenship. Civitas, too, has significant meaning for us: it refers at once to an organized community, to the persons living in such a community, to the community as a state, and to the rights of citizenship within that state. Disciplina in civitatem, then, is a pregnant phrase broadly applicable to much of what we try to do in a system that intends to prepare the student for a role in society.

But that system recognizes the importance of personal education as well. As we live within the conventions of a society on which we have corporately agreed, sometimes at great cost, so we must live in a sense of harmony and understanding within ourselves. Education must stimulate in each of us a sense of potential, of goal, of self-perception, of compassion and of affection that will allow us to relate to the individuals and to the group that make up our society. So it was that Isocrates, addressing the Athenians in 339 B.C., chose to describe the educated person not in terms of the arts and sciences and special disciplines, but rather in recognition of the characteristics of the individual: he looked for one who uses well the circumstances encountered daily, possessing accurate judgment in meeting occasions and choosing the best solutions; who is decent and honorable, tolerant and agreeable, in relations with others; who is moderate in the seeking of pleasure and in reaction to misfortune; and, finally, who is not spoiled by success. Thus his goal for the educated person was societal, behavioral and personal rather than technical and oriented toward skills. We have found a modern combination of the two concepts, true, but the disciplina in civitatem that has brought you to this moment should have encouraged you to make Isocrates' principles a strong part of your own educational aim.

The education being certified for you today by this ceremony and by the diploma you will shortly receive has been variously constructed of a pattern of information, of theory, of skills, and of advice. Despite what you may have felt as quizzes, finals and papers were due, it has been far less dogmatic, far less based on surety, far more tentative in its willingness to be absolute, than almost any generation that has preceded you has experienced. We are living in a world where the once secure term 'infinite' must be used with caution, where Democritus' once safe 'atoms' have been severely violated, where we have broken away from earth's inescapable gravity and have even sent an object out of the solar system, and where our onetime uncertainty about 'psyche' and 'personality' seems mild by comparison to the disturbing potential of genetic engineering and cybernetics. It is my hope that your education has prepared you for three closely related abstractions you will meet daily in your personal and professional lives: change, ambiguity, and diversity. No one of these is new to your time; no one of them need be a threat to the person prepared to meet them. But the rapidity of change, the impact of ambiguity, and the extent of the diversity you may meet will

undoubtedly exceed those of earlier generations.

On the surface change seems the most approachable of the three. You are accustomed to it, you may say; it is a fact of growing up and growing old, of the passage of time. If you have developed a sense of history, an ability to relate the past to your present and to use both to anticipate in some way a future that we can detail only sketchily, then perhaps you are prepared for that first abstraction. But what kind of future does the past help us to see. We want to look and we think we know. But at the Smithsonian Institution now a show has opened called "Yesterday's Tomorrows: Past Visions of the American Future," and in it are seen many blurred visions and unrealized predictions of how we would cope with a world in change or in need of change. In 1948 Charles F. Kettering, a Trustee of the University, spoke at our 75th Anniversary celebrations on "Science and Technology," a subject natural to the great inventor in the wake of World War II's technological eruption. A more confident time, perhaps, but his message was staggering: "In spite of our apparently amazing progress, compared with what remains to be done, nothing has been done yet - nothing at all. We have only touched the surface of what is to be known."

We are obsessed with the future, with what may come to pass, if only because our immediate past seems so brief and our present so breathless. But we need to remember that our past is not so brief after all; it encompasses the human complexities and creativity of pre-history, of China and India, of Greece and Rome, of Egypt and sub-Saharan Africa, and of so many intervening cultures. We are the sum of these experiences, and they provide us with the wisdom and the knowledge with which to understand our 'now' and to anticipate what may come. We have often tried to see cycles in history, returns to past values or forms, interrelations between natural and human phenomena. You will soon see Halley's Comet. Will it speak to you of the last 75 years, or the 75 years to come? Has your education prepared you to accept the imperative links between past and future, and to answer the question posed by poet John G. Neihard just after the comet's last appearance in 1910:

> Once in a cycle the comet
> Doubles its lonesome track.
> Enriched with the tears of a thousand years
> Aeschylus wanders back.

Ever inweaving, returning,
The near grows out of the far;
And Homer shall sing once more in a swing
Of the austere Polar Star.

Then what of the lonesome dreamer
With the lean blue flame in his breast?
And who was your clown for a day, O Town,
The strange, unbidden guest?

And what of ambiguity? Are we not an age, a country, that strives for certainty? We are conservative in the sense that we try to hang on to what seems best from our past, but even that best is under constant revision as we study our early and recent past. Then what is certain? You will often have to ask that, and often, as perhaps in our quadrennial political marathons, you will be told. But remember, the same words mean different things to different people. Look at something as obvious as the interpretations given by differing ideologies of such words as 'imperialism', 'democratic republic', 'cultural', and 'peace-loving.' Understanding these ambiguities will be vital to you, as will those of political economics, so ready to the tongue these days. But how about the ambiguities of literature, of poetry, of imagery? Are these not equally important to understand, and will not that understanding, too, make your life as person and citizen both more comfortable and more productive? I believe your education will have suggested that these ambiguities, and those of science, and of religion, must be foremost in your thought if you are to be such a person. Loren Eisely, the anthropologist, gives you good advice in THE FIRMAMENT OF TIME:

> Man's quest for certainty is, in the last analysis, a quest for meaning. But the meaning lies buried within himself rather than in the void he has vainly searched for portents since antiquity.

Although Neigard's comet may herald the coming back of an Aeschylus or a Homer, according to Eiseley your ability to recognize that return and to appreciate it is within yourself, not in the portent, and is a factor of all that you have become as an individual, Isocrates' educated person and the degree-holder you will be today.

I have implied that differences will be important to you as you recognize change and learn how to use it, and as you perceive ambiguity and hold it as enriching rather than as a snare to be viewed negatively. There remains the further implication of diversity. Has your education prepared you to see diversity as something positive, valuable, exciting, and a building block for that elusive future?

Again, I must hope so, for diversity will be a constant companion in your lives and you will be called on daily to accept it and use it wisely. You have learned to categorize, to sort and to select, to group and to associate in a variety of disciplines. These schemes and paradigms have been useful learning tools, they have helped to organize the chaotic potential of information we present as a part of your education for citizenship. But as the systems have been helpful, perhaps a salvation to your sanity, so I expect that the sum of your education, the stimulation of your own ideas and creativity, has led you to see not only the tension and the continuity of past with future, and the excitement and occasional peril of ambiguity, but also the creative richness of diversity, the uniqueness of the individual within his or her own culture, and the potential in intercultural and interpersonal exchange for enhancing that future of yours. For my witness I call on one whose pronouncements are normally free of ambiguity, whose logic requires him to accept change positively, and who is a personal exemplar of diversity in his own origin, Mr. Spock.

Jean Lisette Aroeste created an excellent script for an episode of STAR TREK called "Is There in Truth No Beauty?" An ambassador of a race so constituted as to be destructive of humankind at mere sight is assigned as a passenger to the Enterprise. His escort is a rather belligerent and protective Dr. Miranda Jones, who has volunteered to be human representative on the ambassador's planet and who seems impervious to the destructiveness of the alien. Captain Kirk discovers that she is, in fact, blind. Spock looks at the disgruntled ambassador and is temporarily blinded, and in the Kirk-and-Spock inspired outcome Dr. Jones softens and understands, the ambassador is happy, and Spock recovers his sight. As usual the point is established literally at the end:

> Dr. Miranda Jones: I understand now, Mister Spock, the glory of creation is in its infinite diversity.
>
> Mr. Spock: And in ways our differences can combine to create meaning and beauty.

Your world is a product of diversity. The culture in which you will play a major role combines a tension between the urge to group and divide and the necessity to share and unite. It is imperative that you use the many facets of the education you take with you to make wise decisions as you face that tension.

The ancient Romans were creatures of ritual, with a phrase for every occasion and the belief that words, the right words, were necessary to insure that the occasion would proceed favorably. They were particularly concerned with beginnings, and since this is a commencement for you, may I hope to insure its success by the recitation of the proper formula:

quod bonum, faustum, felix fortunatumque sit.

May what you now begin be good, auspicious, prosperous and lucky! And as you sing Carmen Ohio for the first time as alumni and alumnae of the University, note the prophetic final lines:

Time and change will surely show
How firm thy friendship, Ohio.

Best wishes to you all.